

Making a Difference in Work-Zone Safety

By DeAnne Bonnot

It happens in a split second.

You're in a work zone, driving a bit too fast and you glance at a ringing cell phone ... turn to tell the kids to settle down ... or look down to change the radio station.

Then ... CRASH ... it happens. You're one of the hundreds of motorists injured each year in Missouri work-zone crashes.

You totaled the vehicle, spent a few hours in the emergency room and took several weeks to recover. You're fortunate. In 2002, 28 people never made it home. One of those people was a MoDOT employee; another was killed in 2003. The others killed in work zones were MoDOT contractors and travelers just like you.

The safety of travelers and employees is MoDOT's first concern.

"We continually look for ways to prevent crashes from occurring in the first place, especially in work zones," says Don Hillis, MoDOT director of operations.

MoDOT works with local newspapers, and radio and television stations to get the word out on work the department is doing in the area. Signs and message boards broadcast

the location of work zones and tell motorists when lanes are narrow or will turn sharply. Workers follow strict rules regarding their behavior and the equipment they use on the road. "But once you've arrived in a zone, the rest is up to you," says Hillis.



To spread that message, MoDOT, with the help of students from the University of Missouri-Columbia's

School of Journalism, developed a safety campaign called "The Difference is YOU. Drive Smart." The whole idea is to make motorists and passengers more aware of their role in safe travel.

"There's a reason why we call them work-zone crashes and not accidents," says Steve McDonald, MoDOT state traffic engineer. "Accidents are not preventable. The vast majority of work-zone crashes can be avoided with just the simplest of actions."

According to Missouri statistics, driver inattention, excessive speed, drinking or drug use, improper lane changes or following too closely are the cause behind most crashes.

Signs with the campaign's message now mark highway work zones. Billboard and radio messages reinforce the message that work zones are only as safe as the workers and motorists make them.

"We chose billboard and radio messages because they can be heard or seen by travelers while they're in the car," Hillis says. "What could be better than delivering a safety message at the site of potential danger?"

The campaign pays special attention to 16 to 25 year-old drivers because they are involved in more work-zone crashes than any other group.

"We encourage young drivers and passengers to realize their responsibility in getting everyone home safely," Hillis says.

MoDOT wants to remind all drivers to pay attention, wear safety belts, avoid distractions and let the driver concentrate on driving – behaviors that make all trips safer, but are especially important in work zones. ■

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